

Residential Summer Programs as Preparation for College

by Linda E. Brody, Ed.D.

The summer break from school offers time to do things you may not be able to fit in during the school year, such as doing an internship, starting a small business, or traveling to interesting places. But if you have never attended an academic residential summer program on a college campus, think seriously about doing so at least one summer during high school. The experience can do a great deal to prepare you for college.

Academic Growth

Residential programs with an academic focus provide a unique intellectual experience. While classes taken online or in a commuter program may satisfy your desire to master a content area, a residential program immerses you around the clock with others who are equally enthusiastic about the subject. You will not only be in class together, but you will be living with your classmates. Conversations about intriguing academic topics can continue over dinner and into free time.

Since few summer residential programs administer grades that will be included on your transcript for college (though the fact that you attended should be included on your application), you might feel free to take a class that you would otherwise be a bit nervous about. This encourages risk-taking, a trait that can be helpful in many circumstances. And succeeding in a fast-paced rigorous course, particularly if it is taught on a college level, will help prepare you for the academic challenges you will face in college.

Life on a College Campus

In a residential summer program, you'll live in a dorm with other students, eat with them in the dining hall, and engage in late-night conversations. You'll be responsible for your personal needs, from doing your laundry to managing your spending money, and you will have to navigate your way around campus. You'll need to deal with the social distractions of dorm life, while still getting your work done on time and without your parents nudging you.

You'll want to make friends—and quickly if the program lasts for only two or three weeks. This will put your social skills to the test, a good exercise for adjusting later to college. You'll need to learn how to share a room with a roommate and face the challenge of getting along with a group of new faces in an intimate environment. But it's likely that, as so many students have who attended these programs in the past, you will find peers who share your interests and passions—peers who may become your lifelong friends.

Thinking Ahead to College

Attending a summer residential program can also help you define the characteristics you want in the college you hope to attend. Even if you have no interest in attending the particular school at which the summer program is held, spending time on a college campus can help you identify the attributes that are important to you.

So, while you are there, look around. Is the size of the campus comfortable, or would you prefer a larger or smaller one? What about the location? Would you be happier in a more urban or more rural setting? Is there something special you want to have with regard to living arrangements or dining options? What about libraries, laboratories, athletic facilities, theaters, or a museum on campus—can you identify which resources will be important to you in the college you will attend? Think about what you do and do not like about the campus on which you are spending your summer and apply those guidelines to your college search.

There are many wonderful options for summer, and you should try to take advantage of a number of them before you leave high school. But spending a summer in residence on a college campus—living and learning like a college student—will help to prepare you to choose the right college to attend and to be socially, emotionally, and academically ready to navigate the demands of life as a full-time college student. ■

